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The Great Gangsters And Film Noir

The Asphalt Jungle
Directed by John Huston
1950; 112 minutes

Cast

Dix Handley
Alonzo D. Emmerich
Doll Conovan
Gus Minissi
Doc Erwin Riedenschneider
Police Commissioner Hardy
Cobby
Lieut. Ditrich
Louis Ciavelli
Maria Ciavelli
Angela Phinlay
Timmons
May Emmerich
Bob Brannon
Andrews

Sterling Hayden
Louis Calhern
Jean Hagen
James Whitmore
Sam Jaffe
John McIntire
Marc Lawrence
Barry Kelley
Anthony Caruso
Theresa Celli
Marilyn Monroe
William Davis
Dorothy Tree
Brad Dexter
Don Haggerty

Credits

| | |
|---------------|------------------------------------|
| Director | John Huston |
| Producer | Arthur Hornblow, Jr. |
| Author | W. R. Burnett |
| Screenplay | Ben Maddow & John Huston |
| Art Decorator | Cedric Gibbons and Randal Duell |
| Photography | Harold Rosson |
| Sound | Douglas Shearer |
| Editor | George Boemer |

Notes

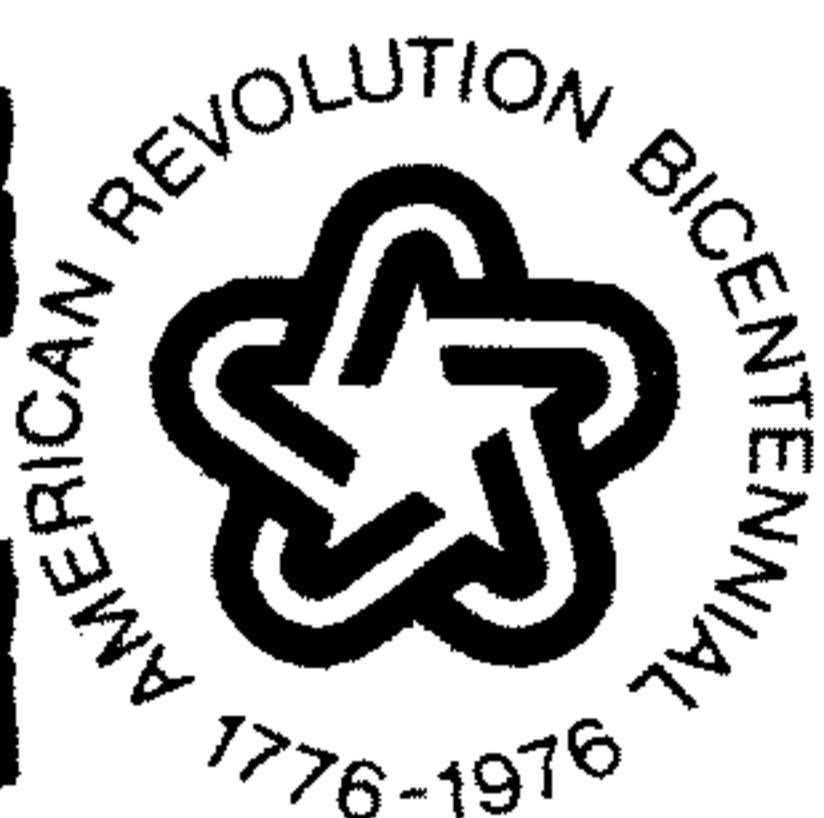
The Big Caper Movie, from director Jules Dassin's Rififi to actor Robert Redford's The Hot Rock all owe their inspiration to John Huston's most admired work The Asphalt Jungle. As his earlier film The Treasure of Sierra Madre was the best film about men on the bum, The Asphalt Jungle is the best movie about urban existence, exposing the corrupt life of the big city, from seedy coffee shops to high rise penthouses. And, like The Treasure of Sierra Madre, its main theme is about men who are destroyed by greed and their own weaknesses.

Like all caper movies, this film is played out against an absence of right and wrong. There is a certain inevitability to the hopelessness of it all. Yet, its stunning jewel robbery sequence, exactly halfway through the film, makes the audience an accomplice and participant in the crime. Despite this, there is little sympathy for the main characters, even though they are more three-dimensional than in most gangster movies. While they are vivid and real, Huston presents them in a detached, analytical way that was new and unusual in 1950.

There are great performances throughout the film, with several people scoring personal triumphs, easily the best of their careers. Sterling Hayden is so fine as Dix that it makes one wonder why this talented actor was wasted in so many bad films. Louis Calhern is just right as the corrupt, socially prominent lawyer who finances the undertaking, and Sam Jaffe is perfect as Doc, the ex-con who masterminds the robbery and is then done in by his own lechery. James Whitmore turns in a sparkling performance, doing his usual imitation of a poor man's Spencer Tracy some 25 years before he discovered Will Rogers and Harry Truman. And then there's Marilyn, a stunner as Calhern's mistress, giving an early indication of how she would dominate the screen and affect us all throughout the '50's.

All aspects of the production are brilliantly coordinated, from the taut dialogue by Huston and Ben Maddow to the sharp editing. Except for incidentals like cars, dress, and juke box music, the film hardly dates at all, thanks to the natural performances and crisp screenplay. Individual sequences are still powerful: the low angle camera work at the credits, physically suggesting the term underworld; the police raid on the funeral; the explosion of the dropped pistol during the silent robbery; the closing shots of Dix's unattainable and peaceful farm fields. But what finally stays in the mind is the 1950 prophetic portrait of the new citizens of the cities - hoodlums, safe-crackers, bookmakers, crooked and vicious cops, corrupt lawyers - the urban society on the make.

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